



CHAPTER 14

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

Introduction

Elections are in the spotlight more than ever, and voters and candidates receive information on the elections process from multiple outlets. The public needs a credible, accurate resource on which they can rely for everything from the most basic election administration information—such as where, when, and how to vote—to more complex issues such as eligibility. Election officials throughout the Nation can continue to be the ultimate authority on the election administration process to ensure that voters and candidates can successfully participate; moreover, election officials should be willing to use every tool available to deliver information to the public. Fortunately, modern communication tools make it easier and cheaper to reach large audiences with election information.

Preparing for an election involves extensive planning. An efficient elections office often has detailed policies and procedures for all aspects of the process, but the best policies and procedures are helpful only if they are well publicized. An election official's effort to educate and communicate with the public has a direct effect on the voters' chances of having a successful election experience.

Getting started is sometimes the hardest part. An election official first needs to define whom he or she serves. Who are the customers? What are the most common questions the customers ask? How do the customers get their information? These questions and answers are the beginning of a communication strategy targeted at the election official's specific community.

An election official who prepares a communication strategy ahead of time will increase efficiency and save resources—people and funding resources that are needed to make sure the election runs smoothly after voting begins. With the strategy, he

or she will also encourage discipline and structure and may reduce the chances of inaccurate or unconfirmed information being delivered to the public. Of course, the election official always expects the unexpected and should be prepared to communicate about developing situations and changes or other unforeseen circumstances. Being prepared helps the election official keep the public informed and minimizes interruptions during the election cycle.

The following paragraphs offer suggestions regarding planning, timelines, and materials that an election official may use to communicate with the public. Examples from various jurisdictions across the country show that an election official does not need to reinvent the wheel to effectively communicate with the public. The strategies used in the examples have already been proven successful, so an election official can simply tailor them for his or her community.

IMPORTANT REMINDER ★ ★ ★

Jurisdictions are reminded to implement these voluntary practices only after reviewing State and local laws and regulations. Local election officials should contact their State election officials with questions about the legality of a specific policy or procedure in their State.

Planning a Communication Strategy

An election official's first step in formulating a communication strategy is to define the audiences. Most election officials have two major audiences: the voters and the candidates. The media may also work to inform the public on a mass scale, but it is the key responsibility of the elections office to act as the official resource for accurate and timely election information.

After the election official identifies the audiences, he or she can determine the kind of informa-

tion voters and candidates want and the best ways to disseminate that information. One of the biggest challenges an election official faces is presenting and organizing a large amount of information in a logical, intuitive manner so that people can easily find the information they seek. One approach is to categorize all the available information into topic areas and then implement it across multiple platforms, including Web sites, which have become the primary information delivery tool for many jurisdictions.¹

When creating informational materials, an election official might consider producing them in accessible formats for voters with disabilities. If the information is being presented through a Web site, for instance, the Web site could meet the standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act² (discussed later in this chapter). In fact, an election official should consider making sure that any information available in print is also available in an accessible, electronic format. Also, election officials in jurisdictions covered by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act³ will make sure that all information available in English is translated into other required languages for individuals with limited English proficiency.

Information for Voters

Voters often ask the same, predictable questions throughout the election cycle. The top questions voters ask include “Am I registered to vote?” and “Where do I vote?”⁴ The answers to these two questions should be easy for voters to locate on every election office’s Web site. Voters also need to know how to register to vote; how to find information about absentee, early voting, and provisional ballots; requirements for voter identification; and information about the voting equipment used in their jurisdiction. The elections office may also need to provide specific information for military and overseas voters. To more efficiently handle the common questions and to reserve resources for the more difficult ones, elections offices may want to

provide a link on their Web site to a Frequently Asked Questions section.

Information for Candidates

Candidates also look to election officials for guidance during the election cycle. Their questions focus more on ballot eligibility, such as filing deadlines, filing information, and the qualifications to be a candidate. For elections that may include a write-in candidate, the election official will make available information about the rules for becoming a write-in candidate—such as prior certification. Election officials may also be responsible for administering the jurisdiction’s campaign finance laws. If so, election officials will need to make the information available to the candidates as well.

Information for the Public

The public may look to elections offices for answers to questions about the administration of elections in a broad sense aside from individual voter requests. For example, individuals interested in serving as poll workers will want to easily locate information about volunteering their time, so they will call the elections office or access the information on the elections office Web site. Likewise, the public, especially the media and academics, which wants elections results and data, relies on elections offices for that information.

The examples above are the basic informational needs for the public. Some jurisdictions also offer information about referenda and initiatives and sample ballots. In many instances, elections office

¹ For more information about voter information Web sites, review the EAC’s Voter Information Websites Study. The report is available at www.eac.gov.

² 29 U.S.C. § 794d.

³ 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a.

⁴ For more information about voter information Web sites, review the EAC’s Voter Information Websites Study. The report is available at www.eac.gov.



This Web site is a good example of making the most requested information prominent and easy to find. www.in.gov/sos/elections.

Web sites feature a “Register to Vote” icon and provide elections office contact information in a prominent location on the homepage. An election official can customize and organize information in the format that will best serve his or her customers.

Developing Communication Materials

After the election official has established the communication strategy and has determined the most pressing topic areas, he or she may decide how to provide election information to the public. Several tools for presenting information include fact sheets, press releases, brochures, videos, frequently asked questions, and maps.

For all of these tools, the election official might consider ensuring that the language is simple, direct, and easy to follow. The official might use active, not passive, language and could avoid bureaucratic terminology that those outside the field of election administration might not understand. The EAC recommends convening a small group that is representative of the people who will use these materials to review drafts and provide feedback about their usability. An election official might develop the following materials to post on a Web site or distribute in another format:

- ★ Registration lookup—An online tool through which voters can determine registration status, usually by entering their full name and the last four digits of their Social Security number.
- ★ Polling place locator—An online tool into which voters enter their address to find the correct polling place.

- ★ Election calendar—An online or printed tool that includes registration deadlines, primary and general election dates, and other key events as far into the future as possible.
- ★ Voter’s guide—An online or printed tool that can include information as basic as the date of elections and important contact information or as extensive the types of voting machines, date of election certification, etc.
- ★ Videos—An online tool that could include voting machine demonstrations, a voter’s guide, registration instructions, and an overview of the elections process. See the EAC’s videos at www.youtube.com/helpamericavote.
- ★ Sample ballots—An online tool into which voters can enter their addresses to view a copy of the ballot they will use during the election and printed copies that are available at the polling place.
- ★ Information kits—A ready-made compilation of printed fact sheets, press releases, calendars, and contact information for anyone who asks.
- ★ Online forms and services—Online tools and services for voters, including online registration and early voting applications.
- ★ Military and overseas voters—An online or printed tool that provides information about important deadlines and how to apply for ballots.
- ★ Historical data—An online or printed tool that provides statistical information from past and current election cycles to voters, candidates, and the media.

Distributing Communication Materials

An election official uses his or her creative energy when determining the best way to distribute materials to voters and to disseminate messages. The election official thinks about how voters in the jurisdiction consume information and tailors the distribution strategy to the patterns in that jurisdiction. In general, an election official will use printed mail, Web sites, the traditional news media, and new avenues via the Internet to deliver information to the public.

Official Elections Office Web Site

Most voters have become accustomed to using the Internet to find basic information about voting, including how to register to vote, where to find a polling place, and how to request an absentee

Official Election Day	Style of Election	Last Day to Register to Vote	First Day for Candidate Filing	Last Day for Candidate Filing	Final Certification Date
February 5, 2008	Presidential Preference Primary Available for public elections	January 9, 2008	October 10, 2007 (Presidential Primary & Jurisdictions in Kansas City begin filing October 23, 2007)	November 20, 2007	November 27, 2007
March 4, 2008 (one charter)	Charter cities and charter counties ONLY	February 6, 2008	November 13, 2007 (Candidates in Kansas City begin filing November 26, 2007)	December 10, 2007	December 24, 2007
April 8, 2008	General Municipal Election Day	March 12, 2008	December 10, 2007 (Candidates in Kansas City begin filing December 26, 2007)	January 23, 2008	January 28, 2008
June 3, 2008	Available for public elections	May 7, 2008	February 12, 2008 (Candidates in Kansas City begin filing February 12, 2008)	March 10, 2008	March 25, 2008
August 5, 2008	Primary Election	July 9, 2008	February 26, 2008	March 25, 2008	May 27, 2008
November 4, 2008	General Election	October 8, 2008	July 15, 2008* (Jurisdictions in Kansas City begin filing July 15, 2008)	August 19, 2008*	August 26, 2008

www.sos.mo.gov/elections/calendar/2008cal.asp

ballot. An election official might conduct usability testing to make sure voters can find this information easily on their Web sites. If the elections office maintains the Web site internally, the election official might have a content management system that allows quick and easy updating. Moreover, the official may want to ensure that the Web site technology—especially bandwidth—is scaled to handle increased traffic in the weeks leading up to Election Day.

When designing the official elections office Web site, an election official should consider the entire audience that will use the Web site, including voters with disabilities. The official can focus on a design that will enable all voters to participate independently in the elections process. All Federal agencies are required to make their Web sites Section 508 compliant for users who have disabilities. Although mandates similar to the Federal 508 requirements vary among States, the U.S. Access Board, a Federal

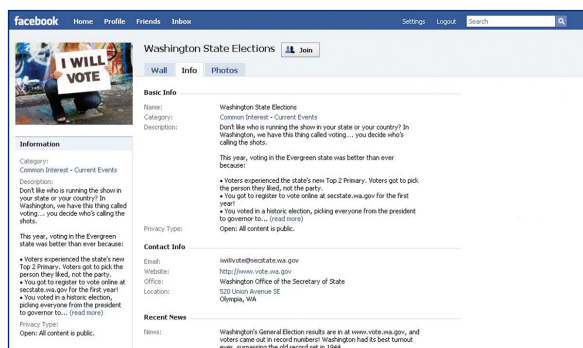
agency committed to accessible design for people with disabilities, has extensive information about meeting the standards on its Web site.⁵ For the official elections office Web site, most of the tips are simple design elements that yield increased accessibility for all Web site visitors.

The Web site is increasingly becoming the public image of the elections office. As such, an election official might coordinate with news outlets, local organizations, and blogs to get them to feature a link to the elections office Web site in their publications and online sites.

Because Web sites are a passive form of communication, elections officials in an increasing number of jurisdictions are collecting e-mail addresses—often through an application on the official elections office Web site—to communicate directly with the voters. Many Web sites spring up shortly before Election Day to offer information to voters. After an election official obtains a voter's e-mail address, he or she can send specific information instantaneously.



Screen shot of the elections home page in Pennsylvania.
www.votespa.com



Screen shot of Washington State elections facebook page.

Traditional News Media

Traditional news media outlets—television, radio, and newspapers—remain the most important means for communicating with voters. When the news media reports a story, an election official can do his or her best to make sure that the facts are correct. A subsequent section in this chapter outlines recommendations for election officials' interactions with the traditional news media.

New Avenues

Blogs and social media sites offer a cost effective way to reach voters. If the elections office has videos, the election official should consider featuring them on a popular video sharing site such as YouTube. Increasingly, elections offices are experimenting with other popular social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.⁶ Elections office staff might consider following blogs with a high readership in their geographic area and identify the ones that might be helpful in sharing accurate and

⁵ <http://www.access-board.gov>.

⁶ The office of the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder used Twitter during the 2008 election (see the section, Communicating Effectively During a Crisis).

timely information about voting procedures with the public in real-time.

Developing Internal Procedures for Staff

Election officials deliver a large amount of information to the public. Sometimes, facts change, unforeseen circumstances arise, and courts make decisions that may affect voters. An election official responds by quickly distributing updated information. To manage rapidly changing conditions, the election official employs structure and discipline. As the election season nears, he or she formalizes staff roles and establishes internal procedures. The election official's goal is to minimize (or at least to effectively manage) surprises.

An election official may not be able to handle all aspects of election administration alone. He or she often has a dedicated and innovative staff from which to draw inspiration and support. As staff size increases, an election official might find it necessary to create a formal decision hierarchy, including an approval process for information that will be released to the public to ensure that message is accurate and current. In such a hierarchy, the election official may designate one high-level member of the staff to issue the final approval for all documents or Web site language. In larger jurisdictions, more than one person may be necessary to perform the duties. This structure fosters consistency and minimizes inaccuracies.

Before making any statements to the public, elections office staff might be trained to receive final authorization from an experienced, responsible, and media-trained staff member. In some cases, the election official handles all press inquiries; in other jurisdictions, a full-time press director handles inquiries. In both cases, the formal decision hierarchy includes a designated spokesperson who provides all information to the media. For jurisdictions that require multiple public information officers, the decision hierarchy reflects that they report to a primary spokesperson. To ensure that all spokespeople have the same information, the elections office holds pre-election training sessions that cover topics such as poll worker duties, voting equipment, and other basics of election administration.

The staff member in charge of communication develops a logistics and staffing plan for communication department for the weeks leading up to and after Election Day. The plan includes roles and responsibilities for all department staff as well as times, locations, and contact information for everyone in the elections office. The plan might also include a master schedule or internal calendar of events.

Finally, the elections office should consider creating a communication contingency plan that addresses how communication with the public and the media will continue in situations such as loss of power, bad weather, and any other disruptions. The contingency plan may also include information about how to handle a mistake, such as the issuance of an inaccurate polling place address. The communication contingency plan is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

tip

Even though we are living in the multimedia age, batteries die and devices get dropped in water or run over. How would you access your contact list in these circumstances? Always take a hard copy of crucial phone numbers.

Working with the News Media

An election official is expected to provide timely and accurate information to the public, and the traditional news media can play a vital role helping to meet this responsibility. Because the election official and the media have common goals—they both want to inform the public, explain the process, and report developments before, during, and after Election Day—their partnership is natural. Because working together makes sense, the election official needs to understand what the media might need and how to get the information they want to disseminate to the public.

An election official should pay close attention to how news articles, especially those produced by wire services, are written. The “hook” at the top of the article makes the most important information obvious. An election official can easily write press releases in a format that does not make reporters search for the facts.

GOOD: Today the STATE Elections Division launched WEB SITE, which provides new online services for voters. The site includes a precinct locator, online registration and other helpful information.

BAD: The STATE Elections Division has heard from numerous citizens about the need to provide basic information about voting. After researching options and gathering input from focus groups, the Division today launched a new Web site with many interactive features, such as a precinct locator. The Web site address is WEB SITE.

To provide information efficiently, an election official might prepare a media kit for reporters, who need the following information about all elections: number of registered voters, number of absentee voters, historical turnout, registration dates, sample ballots, and polling place information. The media kit, which should include contact information for the designated spokesperson(s), could be available on the elections office Web site.

To get help disseminating material to the public, an election official may consider giving reporters access to office staff and timely information. The elections office should aim to be the ultimate resource of election information in the jurisdiction, which often means being responsive on short notice. As it gets closer to Election Day, an election official may need to be available outside normal business hours to answer press requests.

The communication plan discussed previously includes materials for implementation across media. Different media have different needs. Print (newspaper, Internet, or wire service) reporters do not need as much support to report a story, and they usually bring with them everything they need to cover an event. Television journalists need pictures—live shots and “B-roll” (background video), which means that the communication staff will need to consider lighting, staging, and access to electrical outlets. These reporters usually have about 2 minutes per story, so information that the elections office provides to them should be especially brief. Using bullet points is usually a good idea.

Interacting with the Media

An election official does his or her best to educate reporters well before Election Day. The official might consider inviting reporters to observe the pre-election voting system testing and setup. Many

jurisdictions hold a pre-Election Day media briefing, which includes disseminating information about the laws for media at polling places and the availability of elections office staff.

An election official should readily admit when he or she does not know the answer to a press question. Rapidly developing situations are just that, and speculating often does more harm than good. The election official should acknowledge that an event (such as bad weather or a power outage) happened and that elections office staff will keep the public updated as more information becomes available. (The communication contingency plan will include the steps for mitigating disruption.)

Other useful tips for interacting with the media include the following:

- ★ Be honest and friendly.
- ★ Turn off phones and devices before an interview.
- ★ Always try to accommodate reporters on deadline.
- ★ If a mistake or inaccurate statement is made, admit it, correct it, and move on.
- ★ Never be defensive, even if the reporter is.
- ★ Anything that is e-mailed could end up in the newspaper or on the Internet.
- ★ Do not try to provide an answer you do not have.
- ★ Remember to speak to the voters, not the reporter.
- ★ Remember the top priority: always inform voters.

Communicating Effectively During a Crisis

Unexpected events happen during elections, and keeping lines of communication open during a crisis will be more important than ever. If voting is interrupted, an election official will likely be pressed by the media and the public for facts and information about what will happen next.

The elections office wants to be prepared to answer all of the “what ifs” and to deliver the answers to all segments of the public, even those without access to typical means of communication. At least 6 months before Election Day and during the development of an overall office contingency plan, an election official could conduct brainstorming sessions among the staff. These sessions can be used to examine all possible crisis scenarios and to develop solutions. The election official might consider incorporating solutions into the elections office communication contingency plan and share it with anyone who plays a role on Election Day, including individuals or agencies outside the elections office

that will be able to provide assistance during the election cycle.

If the communication contingency plan includes outside agencies, an election official may want to form a task force to bring everyone together. Other agencies to consider include law enforcement, fire department, schools, and utility companies. The elections office's communication contingency plan should work in coordination with the area government's continuity of operations plan.⁷

The communication contingency plan should be ready long before it is ever necessary. By the time a crisis hits, an election official will not have time to reread the laws and consider the wording of a press release or public statement. The election official might adapt the following recommendations to prepare elements of a contingency plan that anticipate disruptions:

- ★ Educate staff about State laws that may affect elections, such as who has the authority to reschedule or cancel an election.
- ★ Develop scripted messages for telephone staff. Develop separate messages for fire/bomb threats and for various weather-related emergencies. Train telephone staff to broadcast these messages.
- ★ Develop draft press releases and e-mail messages to distribute in the event of a disruption. Equally as important, to disseminate the information quickly, have the contact information (especially e-mail addresses) of contacts in the media, poll workers, and as many voters as possible.
- ★ Send a written notice to utility companies notifying them of Election Day activities, including a complete list of polling place locations. Request that they limit activities that could disrupt power.
- ★ Provide law enforcement officials with a complete list of all polling places, including the number of registered voters at each site.

Evaluating Communication Efforts

After Election Day, it is important to assess the success of the elections office's outreach activities. To make changes for the future, an election official needs to know what worked and what did not work.

One way to assess the effectiveness of material distribution is by gathering and analyzing detailed metrics about Web site activity. How did voters use the site? What was the average amount of time they spent on the Web site? What areas were most and least popular? Which Web sites brought in the most traffic—newspaper and television sites or civic organizations and blogs? With this information, the election official can update the Web site for future elections to maximize the audience.

An election official can review election stories in traditional and new media. How accurate and timely were they? Which reporters reported information accurately? Which ones did not? How helpful were bloggers in getting information to voters? Did some reporters write about election topics, but not provide election information to voters? The election official could note the most helpful reporters and blogs and reach out to them during subsequent elections.

Finally, an election official might consider documenting any areas in which the material itself could be improved for the next election. Did the materials effectively support the election office efforts? Did elections office spokespeople have information readily available to answer reporters' questions, or were they often caught off guard? Did the elections office receive a lot of phone calls seeking clarification on any of the publicly available materials?

Helpful Resources for Communicating with the Public

- ★ The Election Official Center at www.eac.gov contains links to communication documents, tools, and other resources.
- ★ The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) at www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm.
- ★ Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government at http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/documents/Federal_Web_Managers_WhitePaper.pdf.

⁷ For more information about contingency and disaster planning, review the EAC's Election Management Guidelines chapter, "Contingency Planning and Change Management," and the EAC Quick Start Management Guide, "Contingency and Disaster Planning," on the web at www.eac.gov.

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